

China's public diplomacy: evolution, challenges, and the Greek case

Zacharias, Georgios

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Zacharias, G. (2021). China's public diplomacy: evolution, challenges, and the Greek case. *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs*, 6(3), 79-89. <https://doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2163079z>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more Information see:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0>



© 2021 The Author/s

This is an open access article under the terms of the CC-BY 3.0 License.

Peer review method: Double-Blind

Date of acceptance: December 07, 2020

Date of publication: January 08, 2021

Review article

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.47305/JLIA2163079z>

CHINA'S PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: EVOLUTION, CHALLENGES, AND THE GREEK CASE

Georgios Zacharias

Sciences Po Paris, France

ORCID iD: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4416-312X>

georgios.zacharias@sciencespo.fr

Abstract: *The construction of a positive international image is profoundly correlated with advancing one's national interests abroad. Influencing foreign audiences and creating multisided links with countries of interest, is the main objective of public diplomacy. In the highly interconnected XXI century, countries have increasingly invested in that practice, assisted by major technological advancements. China is not an exception. The current paper will examine in which ways the latter conducts public diplomacy and through which actors. The study will also try to showcase the evolution and challenges that took place in this domain. Afterward, the case study of Greece will be considered, presenting the Chinese actors engaging in the country, the practices they use, and how the bilateral relationship has been affected. The essay will conclude with estimating the total effectiveness of the practices, possible challenges that exist, and several insights for future reference.*

Keywords: *China; Greece; Public Diplomacy; Foreign Policy; Bilateral Relations*

INTRODUCTION

Public diplomacy as a practice has rapidly developed during the XXI century thanks to the technological advantages of the new digital era and the acknowledgment that image matters. Ministries of Foreign Affairs around the globe are investing in such practices to promote the image of their country on the international scenery and of course their national interests. In China, public diplomacy practices are starting to be emphasized by the Central Committee of the Party as a significant domain for the foreign policy of China, in search of being established as a global power.

Nevertheless, the term 'public diplomacy' is often ambiguous and confused with the similar term of 'soft power'. Both of them are referring to policies aiming to influence foreign countries and promote national interests. The most common definition of public diplomacy is the "country's communication and engagement with foreign publics to support national interests" (Hartig 2016). In the meantime, according to the initiator of the concept of soft power, Joseph Nye, the term refers to "obtain what you want through cooperation and attraction" (Hartig 2016), denying the use of force or coercion. To achieve the latter, instruments such as culture, values, ideas, and policies, in general, are utilized. As a result, for clarity for this paper, public diplomacy is understood to be a tool of soft power, which may also use cultural links and same values with other countries, to influence foreign audiences.

Although difficult to distinguish the terms, it can be accepted that a public diplomacy is a tool of a country's soft power, projecting its image abroad through numerous practices that will be examined in the paper. The case study examined is that of the People's Republic of China. How China conducts public diplomacy, which actors are engaged, how it is orchestrated and executed, and which tools are used, and what are the main goals of engaging and investing so much in this sector, are some questions trying to be answered in this paper. In the second chapter, the paper will examine how these practices took place in Greece, a country of interest of China in Europe if they were effective and the ultimate goals of Chinese engagement. The main hypothesis of the paper is that the Chinese advancement of public diplomatic practices has indeed assisted in the establishment of a positive image in countries around the world. Specifically, in the case of Greece, the bilateral relationship has been enhanced and the public diplomacy of China was effective enough that managed to acquire political and economic gains for the country. The essay will conclude by estimating the total effectiveness of the practices, possible challenges occurring, and changes needed to be made in the years to come.

CHINESE PUBLIC DIPLOMATIC PRACTICES AND ACTORS

Public diplomacy is a fairly contemporary term in China. Until the latest years, Chinese officials were referring to 'civil diplomacy' or 'external communication' since there is no equivalent word of 'public' in Chinese and if it is, it has the definition of "governmental" (Zhao 2019). The former 'external communication' practices of China were not developed enough and created more issues than it could solve. The old practices were similar to propaganda mechanisms since they were focusing on a single way flow of information, guided by the central government, without interaction or engagement with the receiving side (Hartig 2016). This has caused serious consequences since foreign audiences, especially in the West, created a negative image of the country, demonizing China, and its intentions.

The contemporary diplomatic practices of China in this domain, however, have changed. Since the 1990s, the country has altered its perception of public diplomacy, trying to engage and listen to foreign audiences. The Chinese officials well understood the significance of public image since the country has rapidly grown large in political and security terms, becoming the second-largest economy worldwide as well. The new concept of communication with foreigners has as the main aim to introduce the real China, its peaceful intentions and respond to the Western media negative representation of the country as a global multisided threat (Hartig 2016).

Unquestionably, the 'China Threat Theory' is a strong liability and challenge for the country, since it is widely used by foreign officials to describe Chinese intentions (Wang 2011). According to this perception, the country is considered to be a severe economic and military threat with imperialistic views (e.g. in the South China Sea). Asian capitals are constantly worrying about the increasing military power and muscle-flexing of China. In the meantime Western and African countries also doubt its intentions being nervous and suspicious about trade deficits, job losses, and more financial threats (Scott 2015). Concurrently, chronic domestic problems such as environmental issues, human rights violations record, the authoritarian model of governance of the country, and policies towards Tibet, Taiwan, and minorities are considered serious challenges of the Chinese effort to promote a positive global image (Wei 2016).

As a result, China is sensitive about its image and officials have formed specific policies and goals to change 'misleading' perceptions of the country (Chang and Lin 2014). The main orchestration of Chinese public diplomacy began in 1998 by Zhao Qizheng, the Minister of the State Council Information Office (SCIO) at the time. He clearly understood the importance of a positive global image for the country. To achieve it, he increased press conferences, organized meetings with foreign journalists, and initiated the use of the English language. Even if it is well admitted that a lot of domestic issues cannot go public, there was the first serious effort by a high-level Chinese official making an effort to create a positive image abroad (D'hooghe 2008).

A few years later in 2003, the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party introduced a new 'warfare concept', including a sector of 'public opinion warfare'. The aims of it are gaining positive feedback and influence both domestically and internationally, shaping a positive image of the country, and promote national interests (Wang 2011). In these bases, the Chinese public diplomacy has been shaped for the following years until now. Consequently, China is continuously trying to promote an image of a country that is focusing on creating a peaceful "Harmonious World" and being considered at the same time as a trustworthy, reliable economic and political partner (D'hooghe 2008). The rhetoric of public diplomacy is of paramount importance. Due to misinterpretations in previous practices, where the rhetoric was seen as propaganda by Westerners, the new Chinese narrative has changed. To reassure foreign audiences that China is a pacifist global power, some alterations have been made: for instance, instead of using the terms 'Great Power', 'Peaceful Rise' and 'Harmonious Society', Chinese officials now use 'Responsible Nation', 'Peaceful Development' and 'Harmonious World' (Scott 2015). By the language structure and the careful choice of English words and translations, is easy to understand the importance officials give to create a positive narrative, internationally oriented.

In addition to the aforementioned narrative, another practice in public diplomacy is the vast utilization of Chinese traditional culture. Since 2012, China has taken advantage of its approximately five thousand year's cultural tradition to enhance international cooperation. Its apolitical nature is ideal for approaching foreign audiences, making culture the cornerstone of its public diplomacy (D'hooghe 2008). Some cultural practices in this domain could be the strengthening of cultural exchanges, the utilization of cultural artifacts in expeditions between museums, the organization of Cultural Years in foreign countries, and the Chinese language teaching organized by Embassies and the Confucius Institutes (Zhao 2019). As a result, promoting and creating cultural links is an effective way to approach foreign governments and audiences.

Finally, another major instrument, both in the public diplomacy and economic domains, is the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Inspired in 2013 by President Xi Jinping, it aims at connecting Asia with Europe and Africa via numerous maritime and land corridors. In economic terms, its goal is to advance "policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, and financial integration" (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development n.d.). This Initiative has been perceived as a tool for increasing Chinese soft power and advancing its international image via the countries and regions which participate in the project. According to Voon and Xu (2019), the Chinese investments in the BRI countries have brought important advancement in its soft power. The project is also mentioned as "the most significant public diplomacy step taken by China this century" (Voon and Xu 2019), advancing political interactions and promoting a positive image by vast investments in developing countries around the globe (Voon and Xu 2019).

Hence, the Initiative has been a major step towards an overall effort of China to change and promote its image, showing the importance its officials give in upgrading the country's soft power tools.

ACTORS OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN CHINA

The actors conducting public diplomacy are numerous. There is a first distinction between state actors and non-state ones. As far as the first category is concerned, it is obvious that state actors are providing policy guidelines and are orchestrating the public diplomacy of the country. First and foremost, the main decision making organ of this domain is the Communist Party's Central Foreign Affairs Leading Group, renamed in 2018, as the Central Foreign Affairs Commission (Zhao 2019). It is responsible for the decision-making regarding public diplomacy in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and more importantly the Information Department. They also provide services to foreign media and journalists; they cover major events, and they collect information and intelligence of foreign media broadcast stations each time they are referring to China (Hartig 2016). The Public Diplomacy Office also organizes numerous activities addressing international audiences. Another main factor is, of course, the State Council Information Office, which as mentioned before decides alterations in practices and gives policy guidelines when needed (Scott 2015).

Other state actors not heavily involved but participating in the conduct of public diplomacy are the Ministries of Culture and Education. China's Ministry of Culture is of paramount importance since as mentioned beforehand, the traditional Chinese culture has been the cornerstone of public diplomatic practices. They organize large-scale cultural events such as the Chinese 'Cultural Years' or the Chinese Cultural Centers Abroad which are administrated by the Ministry (Hartig 2016). The Ministry of Education in the meantime is also organizing international educational exchanges and programs for foreign students promoting the Chinese language abroad (Wang 2011).

Non-state actors, however, are also extremely important at achieving effective public diplomacy, since state actors are usually viewed suspiciously. The backbone of non-state actors conducting these practices is of course the Confucius Institutes. They constitute overseas agencies around the globe, promoting the Chinese language and culture. They focus on organizing events, language teaching, information, and consultative services, and more. Of course, the goals of their presence are to create a positive image of China to promote its interests such as creating a new market and business contracts and facilitate business activities within the country of interest (Hartig 2016). Nevertheless, their presence is facing challenges. They are often accused of being propaganda instruments of the Communist Party, which undermine the freedom of teaching and are corrupted organizations without particular purposes.

However, their significance cannot be overlooked since they are contributing much to the public image of China abroad. Other non-state actors participating in this effort are of course Chinese mass media and information instruments which are considered to be, at least theoretically, independent. First of all, there is the Xinhua News Agency, the official state press agency. It is considered to be the “mouthpiece” of the CCP since it is a state-owned enterprise. It provides services in 8 different languages, including English programs (Scott 2015). It is easy to understand though, that it is rather ineffective in terms of public diplomacy success. It is regarded by the Westerners as a tool of state propaganda and the information given is not taken seriously into account (Hartig 2016). In the same domain, there is similarly the official newspaper of the ruling party, People’s Daily and Global Times, both aiming at English spoken publics. China’s Central TV, the most significant broadcast agency also is transmitting in 6 foreign languages and China’s Foreign Language Publishing Bureau is also focusing on transmitting news and information about the country and its policies to international audiences (Hartig 2016).

Besides these actors, there are also a few more worth mentioning but not being in the spotlight. However, their contributions to the promotion of national interests are significant. Civil society groups and Chinese individuals are heavily participating in global networks abroad with foreign state and private actors (D’hooghe 2008). They are creating interpersonal links and lobbying to advance Chinese policies and create a positive ambiance towards the country. In similar ways, organizations, businesses, research institutes, or even universities are working towards the same goal with similar practices, providing the Chinese public diplomacy more legitimacy (Sun 2014).

CHINESE PUBLIC DIPLOMACY: THE CASE FOR GREECE

In the previous chapter, there was an attempt to show how the Chinese narrative and public diplomatic practices, in general, are formed and utilized by different kinds of actors. This multifaceted diplomacy can be considered both effective and ineffective depending on the country under examination. In the case of the current article, Greece can be viewed as an interesting case study where Chinese public diplomacy has been exercised in various ways and has achieved to impact positively the local audience.

First of all, to better understand how Chinese influence has been put into place in Greece, some basic facts about the bilateral relations of the two countries shall be mentioned. Even if the two countries have few in common at a first glance, and historically an alliance or political connection has never been concretely founded, the relations between the two countries began with their official establishment in 1972 (Greek MFA). Steadily there has been growth in their relationship, with a couple of remarkable events. Firstly, the 2006 Strategic Partnership, when multifaceted cooperation in multiple domains has been agreed upon; secondly, the 2008 Beijing

Olympics, following 2004 one in Athens, where bilateral cooperation evolved including the transfer of know-how practices to achieve a better result in Beijing. Furthermore, in 2017, China has been declared as an 'honored country' in the Thessaloniki International Fair and the year 2017-18 was also declared as a 'Year of Cultural Exchanges between Greece and China', following cultural exchanges of artifacts between the two countries (Greek MFA). More recently, in early November 2019, cultural exchange activities took place, including groups of 'Travelling Comics' from China to Athens, to 'highlight the deepening friendship and cooperation' between the two countries (Tingting 2019).

It is also worth mentioning, how rapidly and positively the bilateral relations evolved and the two countries came much closer in the last few years. The Chinese public diplomacy can unquestionably take some credits. As mentioned previously, Beijing's public diplomatic practices rely heavily upon the promotion of its traditional culture. This was the main practice used both in its narrative and actions in the case of Greece. In the statements of both Head of States after their bilateral meetings, the common value of enjoying 'centuries-old cultural heritages' was specifically, and numerous times, highlighted (Lihua, Staikos, Xushan, Xiachao, and Meicen 2015). This link lies in the fact that both countries have severely influenced the Western and Eastern civilizations respectively and to clearly understand this linkage, multiple people-to-people exchanges and cultural exchange activities, as mentioned before, have been organized through the years. As a result, the Sino-Greek cooperation in the cultural sector could be considered a strong basis for bilateral relations. The period 2007-2008 was declared as the 'Cultural Year of Greece to China', following the 2017 'Year of Cultural Exchanges' as mentioned above, and of course, the 'Ancient Civilization Forum', orchestrated in Athens, in which China accepted the invitation (Lihua *et al.* 2015). Lastly, the Confucius Institute at the Athens University of Economics can also indicate the cultural penetration of Beijing in Greece (Bentis, Carulas, Mihalaris, and Papoutsas 2018).

Consequently, all the aforementioned actions and practices especially the last decade, have influenced, often indirectly, the Greek public and created a certain image of China, relatively positive, especially in comparison to its counterparts in the EU. The Greek public is generally not disposed negatively towards China, as studies have shown but it is not an enthusiastic audience either. There is an ambivalent ambiance in Greece. The positive image consists of certain perceptions of China as a global power. China is seen as a significant economic partner with a huge international influence that could support Greece politically as well if needed (Bentis *et al.* 2018). There is also commonly accepted that the two countries have strong and similar cultural heritages with 60.9% of Greeks believing that there are things in common, and 38.2% considering there are "a lot" in common (Bentis *et al.* 2018). China gains respect and admiration from the Greek audience and is viewed positively as a potential partner.

Furthermore, according to polls in Greece, conducted by the Public Issue poll agency, Greeks have a positive image of Chinese with a percentage of 71%, and for

China as a country, 70%, percentages considered relatively high for a European state. On the other hand, the Greek audience is not enthusiastic in regards to the form of government in China, the safety of products, which are perceived as of lower quality in Greece, the environmental challenges, and of course human rights violations that have been recorded through the years (Public Issue 2016). As a democratic country and member of the European Union, Greece and the public opinion is relatively sensitive regarding issues of authoritarianism and violations of human rights.


These liabilities mentioned above, are difficult to be confronted. China cannot change its form of government or the perception of its domestic politics in general. Hence, they are often considered as authoritarian or violating basic human rights by foreign observers. However, some measures can be taken. China can indeed conduct a more honest public diplomacy, admitting mistakes, and not trying to distort facts that are already known. For years, its practices have been viewed as propaganda and not as means to friendly approaching foreign audiences. Copying domestic practices of sharing information or news dissemination, create a false image to foreign audiences and the need for understanding their habits, values, and perceptions of the world is rather essential (Hartig 2016). Finally, China possesses numerous state actors regulating its public diplomacy, causing a lack of strategic planning and coordination. Stronger institutionalism with fewer limitations and better collaboration between key actors, such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and State Council Information Office, is highly important for the construction of a concrete and effective multilevel public diplomacy.

CONCLUSION

The public diplomacy of China has long evolved over the years. The constant pressure and sensitivity of the country to create a positive image and be presented as a responsible global actor has forced the Chinese leadership to invest carefully in soft power and communication practices. The suspiciousness of Western publics and elites and the notion that Beijing is posing multilevel threats have been in the center of concern as also mentioned above. The occupation about the international profile of the country of course is connected to the national interests of China. The Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) for instance and similar less huge investments in the economic realm could be at stake if the country is negatively portrayed. This is why public diplomacy efforts are more intense the recent years in certain key-countries such as Greece. Significant Greek Mediterranean ports, the one of the Piraeus area and the other at the city of Thessaloniki, are important for increasing Chinese investments in the European Union and setting in the meantime the basis in the region for its BRI (Reguly 2019).

As mentioned by Reguly (2019), the establishment of a 'foothold' in an EU-NATO member can increase its influence in the Balkans, the neighboring countries, and its European counterparts, since China could gain political support by creating an economic

interdependence with Greece and other European partners. That indeed happened in 2017, when the Greek Government blocked for the first time an EU Joint Statement at the UN regarding human rights violations in China (Emmotte and Koutantou 2017).

Consequently, the public diplomacy of China can be characterized as relatively effective. In the case study of Greece, China indeed managed to address the Greek public gaining its admiration and its trust as a potential economic partner. A high percentage of Greek citizens being favorable to Chinese nationals and China, in general, show the success of Chinese practices in the country. Of course, the promotion of the cultural tradition of China and the common economic interests are some major key points that developed the current perception of the Greek audience. Nevertheless, Greece is only one of the few cases of Western countries seeing China positively. More effort must be made for Beijing to confront suspiciousness and build trust in the international scene with a careful and more honest conduct of public diplomacy in the following years. 

REFERENCES

1. Bentis, Angelos, Carulas, Caroline, Mihalaris, Chris, and George Papoutsas. 2018. "China's Image in Greece: 2008-2018." *Institute of International Economic Relations* 3-47. Accessed November 10, 2019. http://idos.gr/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/China-Image-in-Greece_9-10-2018.pdf
2. Chang, Tsan Kuo, and Lin, Fen. 2014. "From propaganda to public diplomacy: Assessing China's international practice and its image, 1950-2009." *Public Relations Review*, 40: 450-458. Accessed December 10, 2019. doi:10.1016/j.pubrev.2014.04.0080363-8111
3. D'hooghe, Ingrid. 2008. "Into High Gear: China's Public Diplomacy." *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy*, 3: 37-61. Accessed December 10, 2019. doi:10.1163/187119008X284524
4. Emmot, Robin, and Angeliki, Koutantou. 2017. "Greece blocks EU statement on China human rights at U.N." *Reuters*, June 18, 2017. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-eu-un-rights/greece-blocks-eu-statement-on-china-human-rights-at-u-n-idUSKBN1990FP>
5. European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. n.d. "Belt and Road Initiative." Accessed December 12, 2020. <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/belt-and-road/overview.html>
6. Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs. n.d. "Greece - China Bilateral Relations." Accessed November 10, 2019. <https://www.mfa.gr/blog/dimereis-sheseis-tis-ellados/china/>
7. Hartig, Florian. 2016a. *Chinese Public Diplomacy: The Rise of the Confucius Institute*. United Kingdom: Routledge.
8. Hartig, Florian. 2016b. "How China Understands Public Diplomacy: The Importance of National Image for National Interests." *International Studies Review* 18: 655-680. Accessed November 22, 2019. doi: 10.1093/isr/viw007
9. Lihua, Zhang, Staikos, Konstantinos, Xushan, Zhang, Xiaochao, Wang, and Sun, Meicen. 2015. "China and Greece: Enhancing Cultural Understanding and Cooperation." *Tsinghua Center for Global Policy*, March 27, 2015. <https://carnegietsinghua.org/2015/03/27/china-and-greece-enhancing-cultural-understanding-and-cooperation-event-4770>
10. Reguly, Eric. 2019. "China's Piraeus power play: In Greece, a port project offers Beijing leverage over Europe." *The Globe and Mail*, July 7, 2019. <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-chinas-piraeus-power-play-in-greece-a-port-project-offers-beijing/>
11. Scott, David. 2015. "China's Public Diplomacy Rhetoric, 1990-2012: Pragmatic Image-Crafting." *Diplomacy and Statecraft* 26(2): 249-265. Accessed November 20, 2019. doi: 10.1080/09592296.2015.1034563

12. Sun, Wanning. 2014. "Configuring the foreign correspondent: New questions about China's public diplomacy." *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* 11: 125–138. Accessed November 11, 2019. doi:10.1057/pb.2014.20
13. Voon, Jan P, and Xinpeng Xu. 2020. "Impact of the Belt and Road Initiative on China's soft power: preliminary evidence." *Asia-Pacific Journal of Accounting and Economics* 27(1): 120-131. Accessed December 12, 2020. doi: 10.1080/16081625.2020.1686841
14. Wang, Jian. 2011. *Soft Power in China: Public Diplomacy through Communication*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
15. Wei, Cao. 2016. "The Efficiency of China's Public Diplomacy." *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 399-434. Accessed November 11, 2019. doi:10.1093/cjip/pow012
16. Yang, Yifan. 2018. "Corporate Public Diplomacy and Global Communication of China's "Belt and Road" Initiative." *Pacific Focus* 33(3): 497-523. Accessed November 10, 2019. doi:10.1111/pafo.12130
17. Zhao, Kejin. 2019. "The China Model of Public Diplomacy and its Future." *The Hague Journal of Diplomacy* 14: 169-181. Accessed October 20, 2019. doi:10.1163/1871191X-14101033